

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study - Acts Acts 21:17 – 23:35

Today's passage begins the final portion of Acts, in which Paul is arrested and put on trial multiple times in defense of the Gospel, culminating in his journey to Rome.

Read Acts 21:17-25

-Why were the Jewish believers in Jerusalem suspicious of Paul, in spite of all that God had done through him? (you may also consider Acts 21:27-28; 1 Cor. 9:19-22; Gal. 5:1-2,6)

- the fact that he was working among Gentiles probably was enough to arouse suspicion in some
- heard rumors that Paul was teaching Jews in the Gentile world to turn away from the laws & customs of Moses
 - likely word had trickled back from areas where Paul had gone of his work among the Gentiles (cf. 21:27-28)
 - among the Gentiles, Paul likely lived like a Gentile (1 Cor 9:19-22), not adhering strictly to non-essential Jewish customs
 - Paul had opposed the Judaizers and had spoken out strongly against Gentiles being circumcised (i.e. becoming Jews) as part of becoming Christians (Gal 5) (resulted in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15) – some likely extended/twisted this to conclude that he was saying that Jews also should not circumcise their children

-What did James and the elders suggest Paul do, and why did Paul agree?

- suggested that he take part in purification ritual with 4 men completing Nazirite vows – also pay their expenses
 - meant to be public demonstration that the accusations were false and that he lived in obedience to the Law
- Paul agreed to do so – likely as a conciliatory move, in the pattern of 1 Cor 9:19-22

-Why do the Jerusalem elders mention the decision of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) with reference to the Gentile believers? What was the purpose of those directives?

- likely an indication that the suggestion for Paul to undergo Jewish rituals did not apply to Gentile believers, who had already received instructions as to things to avoid so as not to offend Jewish brethren (the original purpose of the directives)

Read Acts 21:26-36

-What similarities are there between the accusations against Paul and the accusations against Stephen (Acts 6:13-14)? What was the irony of the Jews' accusation that Paul was defiling the temple? (v.28)

- Stephen and Paul both accused of speaking against (or defiling) 'this holy place' (i.e. the temple)
- both accused of teaching against the Law of Moses (and Paul of teaching against the Jewish people)

- irony – Paul was purifying himself so that he would not ceremonially defile the temple
 - no evidence to substantiate the charges – the people had jumped to conclusions

- Note: they were accusing Paul of bringing Trophimus into the inner court of the temple (i.e. court of Israel), not just into the temple itself, since there was an outer court that Gentiles could enter

Read Acts 21:37-22:21

-What points of contact does Paul try to make with the crowd? How does he defend himself and the Gospel?

- spoke in Aramaic rather than Greek – many Jews from the Dispersion (i.e. grew up outside of Palestine) could not speak Aramaic
- shows Paul to be more 'Jewish' perhaps than some of his accusers – crowd became very quiet when they heard him
- addresses the crowd respectfully as brothers & fathers
- describes his background and upbringing as a strict Jew & Pharisee trained under the respected teacher Gamaliel (cf. 5:34)
- refers to 'the law of our fathers' (v.3) and 'the God of our fathers' (v. 14)
- tells of his zeal for God, to the extent that he persecuted Christians even to death, and even went to Damascus to do so
 - even the Council could testify to his zeal in this respect, since they had given him letters of authorization (9:1-2)

- defends the Gospel by arguing that this was not his idea, but God's; i.e. his conversion not his idea, but by divine intervention
 - the Risen Lord confronted him on the road to Damascus and struck him with blindness
 - confronted him with the fact that he was not just persecuting Christians, but Christ Himself
 - since God was the one who raised Christ from the dead, Paul was in fact attacking God by attacking Jesus
 - thus, he had to turn away from this and instead serve Jesus as Lord
 - his sight was restored by a well-respected Jew (and Christian), who also commissioned him to be the Righteous One's witness to all men of what he had seen and heard (v.15)
 - restoration of sight a sign proving this commission was indeed from God
 - the Lord (i.e. Jesus Christ) Himself appeared again to Paul while he was praying in the Temple, to command him to leave Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles – again, it was not his idea, but a command from God

To summarize,

- Paul was himself a faithful Jew – the God of their fathers (v.14) was still his God
 - as a faithful Jew, he had been called by Jesus to serve Him – no other option available
- Paul had not apostatized, but stood in direct continuity with the faith of their fathers, through faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the Righteous One of God made known through the will of God (v.14)
- the features of his faith that had changed were not his own ideas, but God's, revealed directly from heaven
- in making his defense, Paul confronts the crowd with the risen Lord's claim to their faith & obedience

Read Acts 22:22-23:11

-How does the Romans' treatment of Paul contrast with that of the Jews?

- Romans protected Paul; tried to stick with their laws and made several efforts to get at the truth
 - Luke tends to portray Roman authorities as being favorably disposed to (or at least tolerant of) Christians
- the Jewish people reacted violently; passed summary judgment without evidence – degenerated to mob rule
 - jumped to conclusions about Paul & Trophimus
 - had the Law but did not keep it – e.g. broke law while interrogating Paul in the Sanhedrin by striking him

-Why do you think Paul responded the way he did to being struck? (cf. Christ's response to being struck in John 18:22-23; Paul's writing in 1 Cor. 4:12-13)

- not completely sure – various theories
 - maybe he lost his temper? – possible, as the Bible does not conceal its heroes' shortcomings and sins
 - seems to apologize in 23:5
 - some think he was speaking prophetically, i.e. that God would strike Ananias & remove him from his position
 - may have been speaking sarcastically when saying he did not realize it was the high priest (i.e. 'I did not realize that such a man could be the high priest)
 - perhaps did not realize that it was the high priest due to poor eyesight (cf. Gal. 4:13-15 – problems with his eyes)
- note in passing: we need to be careful also not to speak evil of the rulers of our people

-What is the essence of Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin?

- that he is a faithful Jew – indeed, a Pharisee – who has faithfully discharged his duty to God in clear conscience
- that faith in Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish (or at least the Pharisaic) hope in the resurrection of the dead
 - i.e. rightly understood, true Judaism finds its fulfillment in Christ
- results in uproar, as some sympathetic to Paul stood up in his defense

-Why does Jesus appear to Paul (v.11)? What is the purpose of the trials that Paul is going through?

- Jesus appears to encourage and strengthen Paul through the trials yet to come
 - reassures him that these things are all under the sovereign control of God – thus, Paul will get the opportunity to testify in Rome
 - this process will ultimately take 2+ years – Christ's words no doubt will be a great source of strength through those uncertain times
- Paul's purpose/task is not to defend himself, but to testify to Jesus – i.e. what Paul has seen and heard (22:15) to all men, from Jerusalem to Rome (v.11)

Read Acts 23:12-35

-How is Christ's sovereignty over Paul's situation demonstrated in this passage?

- plot against Paul overruled by God – uncovered by Paul's nephew, who informs Paul & the Romans
 - Paul protected by Christ, through the actions of the Romans
 - results in Paul's transfer under heavy guard to Caesarea for trial there
 - would be first step in his going to Rome – in fulfillment of Christ's promise to Paul (Acts 23:11)

Reflection and Application

Today's passages mark the beginning of a new (and lengthy) section in the book of Acts in which Paul is portrayed not just as a missionary, but as a witness, commissioned by Christ Himself, on trial for the Gospel. As such, his task was not so much to defend himself against his attackers, but to testify about Jesus Christ (23:11), faithfully bearing witness to all men of what he had seen and heard (22:15), so that Christ would be exalted through him, whether by life or by death (Phil. 1:20). As Christ's witness, he had to be ready to testify at a moment's notice in the face of rapidly changing situations – to a raging crowd that was trying to kill him, to the Jewish high Council, and to various levels of the Roman government.

In the same way, we are witnesses commissioned by Christ to testify of Him to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Our desires should therefore not be so much for our own reputation, comfort or safety, but that Christ might be exalted in our bodies, whether by life or by death. How do you respond when others attack you for your faith? Is your first instinct to defend yourself, or to testify about Jesus Christ? "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Pet 3:15-16)